Netwatch

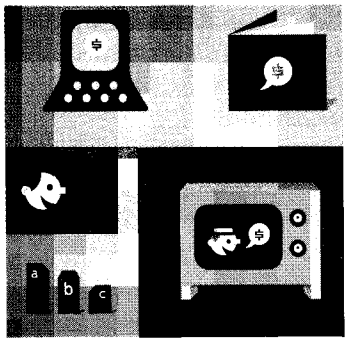
By Jim Carroll

Your guide to business & accounting on the Internet

Looking beyond Windows

Given corporate Canada's growing reliance on Windows-based server technology, many people are concerned with the rising cost of their office communications infrastructure, particularly as licence fees continue to increase. That is why organizations such as Dell, HP and IBM feature a greater number of Linux server technology in their product lines. They know Linux is a reliable, effective and powerful system upon which to build an office environment.

While Linux has great momentum among techies, there hasn't been much focus on how businesses can use it as a low-cost alternative to Windows. For example, why not use Linux for a sophisticated office or companywide groupware system? Many such solutions are available, including free, open-source offerings and those provided by commercial companies for a fee.



Possibly one of the best free options is eGroupWare, a system that runs on a Linux server and allows access to applications using a Web browser. Its applications include personal and team calendars, e-mail, an address book/contact management tool and a companywide bulletin board. There is even a personalized stock quotes page. Many other features are built into the program — just choose the ones you want to install. For example, there are knowledge management tools, group discussion forums and a module that lets users customize their own page of daily comics, which are automatically retrieved from the Internet.

Concerned whether there will be ongoing support for a free tool such as this? I'm not — there are already hundreds of organizations worldwide using eGroupWare, and there are dozens of developers involved in the project, driven by their passion to develop an alternative.

Another groupware option is Share360 from Cybozu (which runs on Windows as well as Linux). Its numerous full-featured programs include a detailed time-reporting application and a forms section with pre-designed forms, such as expense reports, but also lets you design your own forms. Unlike eGroupWare, there is a fee for this software, but the organization provides professional support.

Linux can also be used to build a heavy duty team-based knowledge management tool. For that purpose, I've settled on Traction TeamPage, which also comes with a price tag. Once again, it is Web based, and runs on the same Linux server that I run eGroupWare and Share360 on. I feed Traction with a daily stream of information — thoughts on particular issues, things I've seen on the Web and news articles. All of the information is organized into various categories related to the work I do (trends, career issues, etc.). It has become one of my most important tools, helping me master the vast volumes of information that are the core of my professional skills base.

Last but not least, I am moving away from using a Windows e-mail client (with all the challenges with viruses, etc.) to a Web-based e-mail system called SquirrelMail, which is free. Not only can I access my mailbox anywhere I have a Web browser, but I also have a full-featured program with spam filters, detailed address list databases, mailing lists, message folders and more.

The key point — it might be the right time for you to step out of the box of applications that you have worked with until now. There is a flood of new options coming to the world of Linux. It truly is becoming an alternative for effective office-based groupware applications.

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a well-known speaker, author and columnist. Reach him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com or log on to his website at www.jimcarroll.com

ALTERNATIVE APP INFO

eGroupWare www.egroupware.org

Share360 www.share360.com

Traction www.tractionsoftware.com

SquirrelMail www.squirrelmail.org